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ABSTRACT

In December 1993, children who were in grade 3 in the Trenton Public Schools (New Jersey) in 1985-86 will take a high-risk writing proficiency test to determine whether they will graduate from high school. An emerging study of the writing of the Class of 1995 in Trenton is described as students move toward that test. The activity of studying writing is described as a process of staff development. The study began in 1986 when the first samples of writing were collected from third-grade and sixth-grade students; 868 and 758 papers of third graders in 1986 and 1987, respectively, and 879 and 697 papers of sixth graders in 1986 and 1987, respectively, were analyzed. These samples established a baseline for program evaluation. Further information was collected in a large sampling (688 students) when the students were in grade 6 in 1989 and from random samplings (200-350 papers) in 1987 and 1988. Papers were coded by teacher, class, and school, and filed by grade and year. Scorers used 1986 and 1987 papers to select model papers representing a range of the children's work as developmental markers for the curriculum and as a working baseline and basis for two guides forming a writing evaluation system. The study has revealed much about the writing of children in Trenton schools, and it represents an initial step in finding ways of predicting the success of students and classes. The investigation holds the potential to enable generalizations about Trenton's instructional programs for young writers. Reconstructions of the individual portfolios of students will be a springboard for descriptions of how students in the Trenton schools learn to write. Appendices include a student portfolio profile sheet, two data tables, two graphs, directions and guidelines for teachers administering the preliminary writing tests, and data charts for test results. (SLD)

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'95 or Bust: Studying Writing in an Urban District as the Class of '95 Heads Toward a High Risk, Statewide Graduation Test

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In December, 1993, the children who were in Grade 3 in the Trenton Public Schools (Trenton, New Jersey) in 1985-86 will take a high risk, writing proficiency test. New Jersey's first Eleventh Grade High School Proficiency Test will determine whether they will graduate from high school. This paper describes an emerging study of the writing of the Class of '95 in this urban, capital city as her students move toward that test. The paper also describes the emergence of studying writing as a process of staff development.

The purposes of the study have evolved from its inception in 1986, when "first draft," prompted, writing samples were collected from all Grade 3 and Grade 6 students. This paper will describe assessment processes and share initial outcomes from an investigation now intended to span nine years of schooling experience of the Class of '95, from the end of Grade 3 to graduation.

The Class of '95's initial writing samples were scored along with papers from Grade 6 (1986) and Grades 3 and 6 (1987). This was done in order to establish a baseline for program evaluation and took place at the time that New Jersey had just instituted a Ninth Grade High School Proficiency Test, and Trenton had begun a staff development writing project. Continuous, annual, district-wide collections of writing samples have yielded an archival resource. The district can obtain program assessment data and establish models of writing proficiency levels, while the writing project has a wealth of student texts to study and use in training teachers to know student writers.

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Initial outcomes are reported in scoring comparisons between the 3rd and 6th grade years and in the effects of the data collection, scoring, and reporting processes. The processes and procedures of data collection and analysis are yielding data that can be described in terms of program status and staff development. These include activities such as construction of a writing evaluation system for Grades 3 and 6 (Buddemeier, 1987, 1988) and the investment of teachers with the ability to identify writing development in students across time.

The reconstruction and review of individual student portfolios and their effects on staff development can also be reported as initial outcomes. This includes modeling the value of student texts and text collections (folders or portfolios) as a springboard to knowing student writers and the acceptance by teaching staff of that value.

The study relates itself to the literature on large scale writing assessment, individual writer investigations, and staff development in writing. Also in view is state monitoring of public schools. Theoretically, the study acknowledges the value of a multi-level investigation in explaining writing development of both groups and individuals (Graves, 1981).

The purposes for studying these Trenton students' writing are becoming clearer. The study is addressing public accountability and developing some ability to predict success of students and classes. As teachers and administrators collect writing samples and other data, and then discuss ways of analyzing the data and expanding the collection, they demand the ability to know about the writers behind the texts. In addition, the investigation now holds the potential to enable generalizations about Trenton's instructional programs for young writers.

Sample Collections and Scoring: the Scope, the 1986/87 Procedures, and the Writing Evaluation Systems for Grade 3 and Grade 6

Since June, 1986, the Office of Basic Skills/Developmental Communications has collected samples according to the timeline below. The timeline includes projections through 1995 and indicates state-mandated writing samples, which can be used in the studies. Random collections taken in 1987 and 1988 are noted, "X-r".

TRENTON WRITING STUDIES 10 YEAR TIMELINE

	1986	1987	1988	1989	1990	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995
3rd	X	X	X	X						
4th		X-r	X-r							
5th		X-r	X-r	X						
6th	X	X		X	X					
7th				X	X	X				
8th			X		X	X HSPT EARLY WARNING TEST				
9th	New Jersey High School Proficiency Test				X	X	X	X		
10th								X	X	
11th									X NEW NJHSPT (12/93)	

Assessment data for the Class of '95 was collected through two large scale samplings (Grade 3/1986, Grade 6/1989) and two random samplings (Grade 4/1987, Grade 5/1988). Large scale samplings provided from 750-900 papers, one paper for each student at a grade level, in 39-47 classrooms. Random samplings provided a sample base of 200-350 papers, one paper from each student in 12-16 classrooms.

The topics were identical in Grade 3 and identical in Grade 6 from year to year. "Guidelines" and "Topic Sheets" can be found in Appendix A. "Guidelines" distributed before and at the time of the sample specified the length of time for the sample and amount of teacher assistance to be offered during the sample. All paper was supplied. "Guidelines," "Topic Sheets," and paper were distributed in an envelope, one per class/teacher, on one day; the sample was given the next day; the completed papers were collected in the envelopes the third day.

All papers were coded by teacher/class, school, and year and filed by grade and year. Each paper identified the student by name. (Such coding and record keeping regarding the coding has proved useful in searching for individual papers. The ability to sort by teacher and school may prove useful in program evaluations.)

During the summer (1987) two teams of ten teachers, one scoring Grade 3 and the other Grade 6, scored the 1986/87 papers, as one batch, using a holistic scoring procedure and a six point scale.

The scorers then selected and described model papers which represented a range of the children's written work at each of the grade levels. These selected papers became developmental markers for the elementary curriculum and a working baseline--a locally-normed system of models, across a six point quality range, of

what Trenton kids could do at Grades 3 and 6 in 1986/87. This process borrows from the Grosse Point, Michigan plan (McCaig, 1981) for evaluation of student writing, which was developed in the 1970's.

Two guides containing those papers and brief descriptions of each paper were then published--The Trenton Writing Evaluation System for Grade 3 and The Trenton Writing Evaluation System for Grade 6. At Grade 3 and at Grade 6, the guides try to describe the characteristics of papers in each score point range. Descriptions were made after the papers had been scored holistically and a score point (1-6) had already been assigned. The goal of the guides was to help teachers see what describes a SCORE 6 paper, what distinguishes a SCORE 4 paper from a SCORE 3 paper, why a SCORE 2 paper is not a SCORE 1, and so forth.

Results from Grades 3 and 6 in 1986/87 can be found in Appendix B--"Data Chart, Grade 3 (1986/87) and Grade 6 (1986/87)."

1989 Sample Collection and Scoring for Grade 6

In June, 1989, a team of teachers, scored samples from 688 (1989) Grade 6 students. Papers from these students were in the Grade 3 (1986) scoring described above. They were assigned the same prompt given to the 1986/87 Grade 6 students.

The scoring team was trained to score on the same anchor packets used by the 1987 scorers. They also referred to the Writing Evaluation System developed from the 1987 scoring. The goal was to reference the 1989 scoring of Grade 6 to the 1986/87 papers, that is, to use the identical scoring method. New Jersey uses the "registered holistic scoring method" (Bloom, 1985) to score the Writing

Section of the current, State High School Proficiency Test and is certain to continue to use that method when the test becomes an eleventh grade test. Referencing Trenton scores to a previously established baseline, as in the 1989 Grade 6 scoring, is a similar procedure.

The "Comparative Data Chart, Grade 3 (1986) and Grade 6 (1989)" (Appendix C, Figure 1) shows percent of papers in score point ranges and percent change from 1986 to 1989. Note that scores are reported on a scale of 0 to 12. All papers were scored twice on the 1 to 6 scale, and scores were combined. Non-scorable responses are included in the total count and in lower half tabulations, but are not included at a score point.

Figure 2--"'Upper Half/Lower Half' Percentages, Grade 3 (1986) and Grade 6 (1989)" highlights the major shift in the percent of papers scored "lower half" (0 to 6) and "upper half" (7-12). There is a clear increase in the number of Upper Half papers. Figure 3--"Grade 3 (1986) to Grade 6 (1989): Score Point Comparison" details the movement of those papers. The middle, 6/7 Score Point, shows growth, but the most dramatic increase is at the 7/8 Score Point where there is a 17% increase. The most dramatic decline occurs, not towards the middle at Score Point 5/6, but at the lower end at Score Point 4/3.

The quality of the writing samples improved significantly in three years, from the end of Grade 3 to the end of Grade 6. Almost one-fifth of the writing samples moved significantly from clearly unacceptable to definitively acceptable.

Into Grade 7 and the Reconstruction of Portfolios

One particular problem precludes reliable whole group comparisons of earlier samples with those collected in Grade 7 and following. Efforts to predict success and to evaluate instructional programs evaluations must account for the impact of student mobility on student achievement. An in-house study ("Impact of Mobility on Student Achievement: Grade 6, 1988 to Grade 7, 1989", 1989) showed 26.8% of all Grade 6 students leaving the district and an almost equal number entering Grade 7. While the scores of the students leaving the district are slightly below the total group in reading and language, the scores of new entrants to Grade 7 are dramatically lower than those in the leaving group.

There are other reasons to redirect or supplement the large scale writing sample collections. In 1981, Donald Graves called for multi-level investigations that keep individual writers in view, while simultaneously looking at classes and schools. He also emphasized expanding the time dimension of such research:

> Depth must also be added through more intensive case studies with intra-differences (within the child differences) explained through one case. One child's behavior is described with the context of at least one to three years. In this way the pattern of development within one variable or across variables can be examined and explained over a much longer period of time. (p. 111)

A quick look at writing research in the 1980's shows the serious attention paid to developing individual cases.

The collected, archived, and scored writing samples from Trenton's Class of '95 have, initially, supported local goals of measuring student progress and reporting proficiency. However, the written products and scoring processes described above have come to be viewed not only as an end point, or simply end products. They are a starting point. The texts are a rich source for staff development.

Inferring from the texts and speculating based on their own experiences and their encounters with the texts, teachers have begun to inquire further. Their more systematic inquiries are helping them to see the writers behind the texts, to see the writers' contexts and strategies (or processes) i.e., to know the writers.

The recent wave of portfolio experimentation has emphasized annualized, individualized, in-class archives (Atwell, 1987; Winograd and Paris, 1988). Such portfolios are often used diagnostically and sometimes include components that allow for larger scale comparisons (Simmons, 1990; Wolf, 1989). Valencia (1990) proposes a distinction between "required evidence [which] enables us to look systematically across students" and "supporting evidence [which] takes advantage of the uniqueness of each classroom and student."

In 1989-90, given our large scale data and the resource of our ongoing, in-district, writing project, we began a "portfolio reconstruction" project. As the Class of '95 entered Grade 7, a group of teachers sorted archived papers to assemble 122 individual student folders. Each folder, or portfolio reconstruction, contains 3 or 4 samples from large scale collections, from Spring, 1986 to Spring, 1989. (Since only a random sample was collected during these students 4th (1987) and 5th grade (1988) years, it was extremely difficult to find a paper for each year for any given student. The difficulty was increased by transfers between city schools as well as out of the district.) Each of the 122 students was located in one of the city's five junior high schools and a database record and tracking system was initiated. We then attempted to add to each folder one or more self- or teacher-selected pieces from the first semester of Grade 7. (This experience in itself could be documented to provide a wealth of revelatory program data.)

In January, 1990, a group of nine teachers piloted a folder review process. At that time two monitoring documents were added to each folder: (1) A data sheet ("What's in this Portfolio?" in Appendix D-1) identifies the folder contents, including samples and other papers by year, reviewer interactions with the folder, writer input or interviews, and teacher report data. (2) The other document ("Portfolio Profile" in Appendix D-2) charts a review team's responses to the folder. The proto-type of this document had been devloped by the scoring team in June, 1989, from reviews of a limited number of folders.

The summary that follows is a narrative report of the review process and generalizations about the folders themselves, gleaned from a follow-up discussion with reviewers. We are not ready to analyze data across folders or to report on individual folders.

The review process was slow. Training and discussion was limited to one and a half hours using anchor sets of prompted papers, exhibiting consistent development across years, and proto-type folders, exhibiting less consistent performance across years. Two review teams of four teachers each, then worked six hours to review 28 folders. Their recommendations will further modify the profile form, for use in subsequent reviews.

Analyzing one folder with four prompted pieces from four different years, plus some other writing, the gaps in the picture of a student writer seem to grow even larger. That is, the time span presents more gaps than findings. Initial reviews suggested that the content of prompts affected product quality. A special clarity seems to resolve when a reviewer is looking at a variety of writers writing on several of the same prompts. The performance of some writers was

comparatively better over all years, substantiating that we were looking at a variety of writers. On the other hand, some writers performed inconsistently, producing better quality writing in an earlier year, which raises a host of questions.

In nearly all cases, teams could document change, but they concluded that they had difficulty using a common terminology to discuss writing changes across years. They recommended their training for subsequent reviewers and suggested that it be supplemented by training with a modified profile form, which would include stricter, analytical terminology. They also recommended including a timeline, charting "progress" across time and/or including some numerical scales to develop uniform reporting between folders.

Teachers serving as reviewers recognized that a student's texts change across years. Identifying the source of changes across years was difficult and often frustrating, with only the text at hand. The purpose for data collection and analyses in the next two years will be to help teachers identify ways to know writers better. The profile review format will be updated and revised to include reviewer recommendations and to address new data added to the folders.

In addition, two years of Trenton Writing Project workshops have led to the development of a writer interview form ("Biography of a Writer" Appendix E-1) and an inquiry report outline (Form for Writer/Product Investigation" Appendix E-2). Using these documents, twenty teachers reported on individual student's written works, histories, abilities, perceptions, and attitudes. Their informal, narrative reports form a body of knowledge that is local, contextualized, and

referenced to students' writings. The ongoing study will draw from these proto-type tools to add data to the selected Class of '95 folders.

Looking Ahead

The course is set to follow the Class of '95 as it heads toward the State's first eleventh grade test in December, 1993. Ongoing large scale assessments will be more clearly interpreted in comparison to previous assessments and with the assistance of ever growing portfolio reconstructions.

The course is also set for studying writing. Teaching staff involvement in the processes of assessment are bringing teachers closer to the State's method and, importantly, closer to the products and development of local student writers.

A measure of the growing influence of staff development efforts, such as the Trenton Writing Project, on instructional programs should become available through the study. As the Project moves beyond its fifth year, 1990-91, and as students have increasing exposure to to teachers who have experienced Project training, we can expect standardized, required evidence to show gains.

Portfolio reconstructions will be a springboard for rich descriptions of how students learn to write in the Trenton Public Schools and what concerns those students bring with them to the task. They may help us discover markers or "local change points" in learning to write. They will, at least, be the raw energy that fires staff development discussions and instructional innovations.

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WRITING SAMPLE, THIRD GRADE

General Directions and Guidelines to Third Grade Teachers

Materials:

Distribution/collection envelope
Topic Sheet
30 Sheets of paper
This guideline page

General Directions:

1. Keep the envelope. (Teacher's name and grade should be on it.)
2. Put the topic on the board.
3. Use the paper. (If additional is needed, please use any of similar size.)
4. Child's name should be written in the top right corner of every page. (Please check completed papers for this.)
5. Place completed papers in the envelope and return them to the school office.

Guidelines:

1. You may choose to talk about the topic with the class before writing begins.
2. At the teacher's discretion, students who are very uncomfortable with the topic may select their own, but this should be the exception.
3. Classroom resources (dictionaries, etc.) may be used. (Stories may not be copied.)
4. Pictures may accompany the work, on the same page. (Optional.)
5. Students should work silently.
6. Adequate time for the writing, up to 30 minutes, should be allowed.
7. Any dark pencil or pen may be used.
8. Limited assistance to individuals is acceptable and expected.

CONTACT YOUR PRINCIPAL OR THE SUPERVISOR'S OFFICE IF ANY PROBLEMS ARISE.

PLEASE GIVE THIS SAMPLE ON THURSDAY.

Third Grade--TOPIC

YOU ARE WALKING HOME ALONE,
AND IT IS GETTING DARK.
YOU HEAR FOOTSTEPS THAT
SEEM TO BE FOLLOWING YOU. Write a story telling what happened.

Things to think about: Think of the whole story--
beginning, middle, and end.

What did you see?

What did you do?

Where were you?

How did you find out what was following you?

How did you feel?

Teacher: Please write the topic on the board.

Also, write on the board "things to think about."

See "Guidelines" (other page) for further instructions.

NOTE: Students may need help thinking about the topic. You may choose to talk about it as a group before students begin their individual compositions. Each student is asked to write a narrative in which they imagine they are being followed. Stories can be as fantastic ("wild") or as real as students choose to make them.

SIXTH GRADE, WRITING SAMPLE

General Directions and Guidelines to Sixth Grade Teachers

Materials:

Distribution/collection envelope
Topic Sheet
30 sheets of paper
This guideline page

General Directions:

1. Keep the envelope. (Teacher's name and grade should be on it.)
2. Put the topic on the board.
3. Use the paper. (If additional is needed, please use any of similar size.)
4. Child's name should be written in the top right corner of every page. (Please check completed papers for this.)
5. Place completed papers in the envelope and return them to the school office.

Guidelines:

1. Limited assistance from the teacher in interpreting the topic and the task is permitted and expected.
2. Adequate time for the writing, up to 45 minutes, should be allowed.
3. Students should work silently.
4. Any dark pencil or pen may be used.
5. Classroom resources (dictionaries, etc.) may be used.

CONTACT YOUR PRINCIPAL OR THE SUPERVISOR'S OFFICE IF ANY PROBLEMS ARISE.

PLEASE GIVE THIS SAMPLE ON THURSDAY.

TOPIC--Sixth Grade

- I REMEMBER SOMETHING THAT HAPPENED TO ME THAT MADE ME HAPPY or
- I REMEMBER SOMETHING THAT HAPPENED TO ME THAT MADE ME SAD.

Things to think about: What happened? Think of the whole story.

When did it happen?

Where were you?

How did you feel?

Teacher: Please write this topic on the board.

Also, write on the board the "things to think about."

NOTE: Students may need help understanding the topic. They are asked to write a personal narrative about something that happened to them. They should tell all about what happened. They will want to choose a special day, special time, or special event. It is most important that they tell a story about themselves, a story they remember that makes them happy or sad.

APPENDIX B

DATA CHART
GRADE 3 (1986/87) AND GRADE 6 (1986/87)

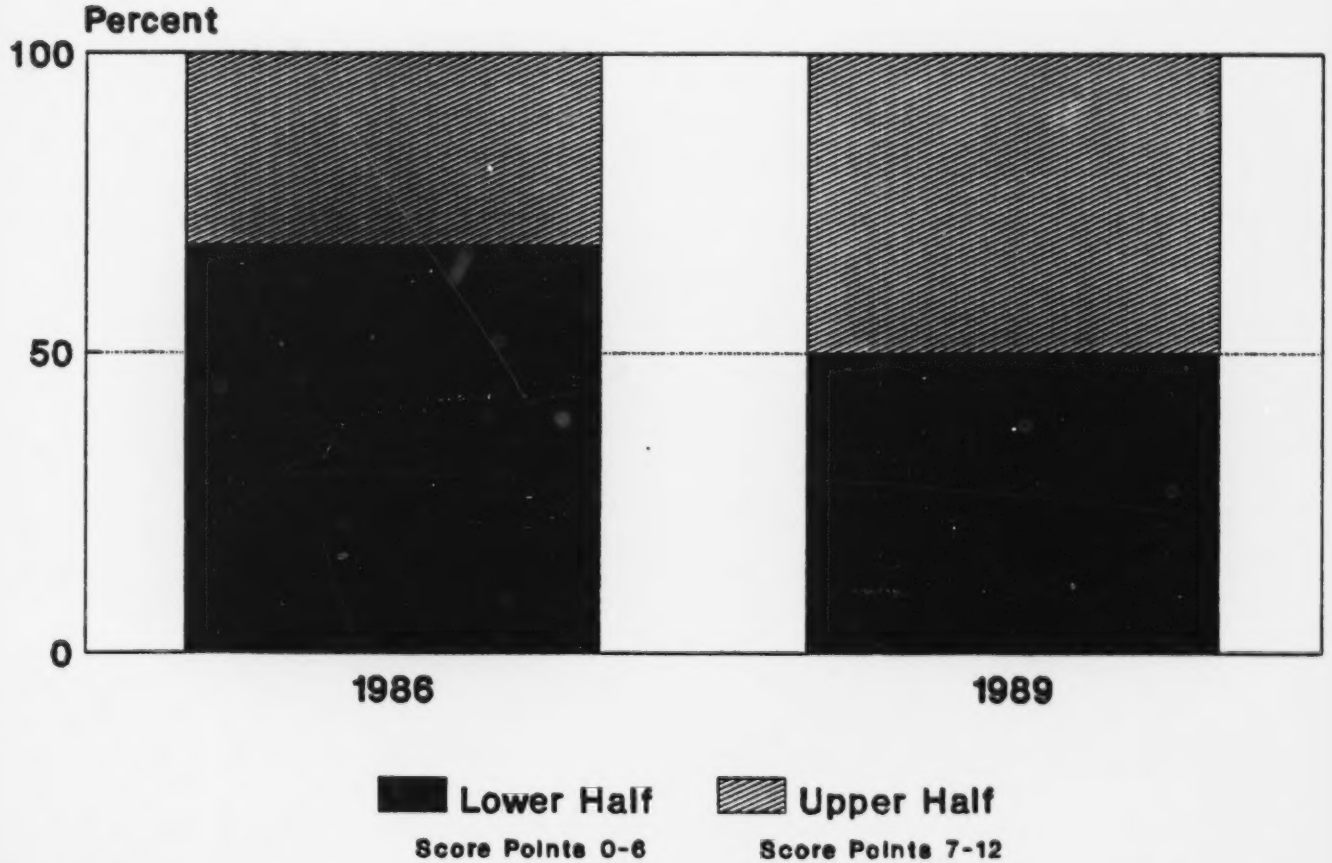
	Grade 3		Grade 6	
	1986	**1987**	**1986**	**1987**
Total Number of Papers	868	758	879	697
Score Point	**Percent**		**Percent**	
11-12	4.0	3.7	9.5	2.9
9-10	9.7	9.5	22.0	15.4
7-8	18.3	22.3	29.5	32.0
5-6	30.3	32.5	24.0	30.3
3-4	28.3	25.3	12.0	13.0
0-2	9.4	6.7	3.4	6.3
Upper Half (7-12)	32	35.5	60.6	50.4
Lower Half (0-6)	68	64.5	39.4	49.6

APPENDIX C FIGURE 1

COMPARATIVE DATA CHART
GRADE 3 (1986) AND GRADE 6 (1989)

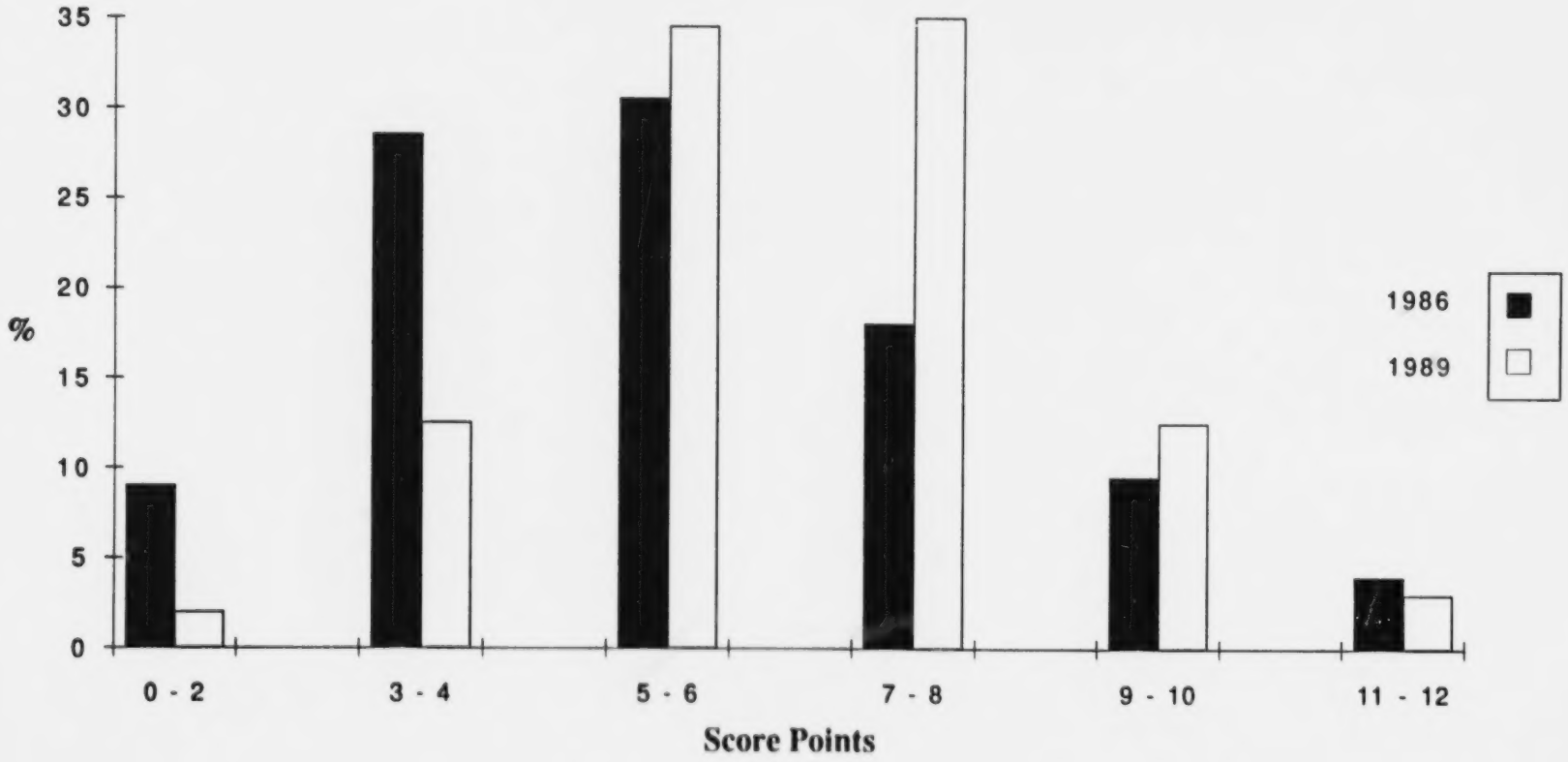
Score Point	Grade 3	Grade 6
	Percent	
11-12	4.0	2.5
9-10	9.7	12.5
7-8	18.3	35.0
5-6	30.3	34.5
3-4	28.3	12.5
0-2	9.4	3.0
Upper Half (7-12)	32.0	50.0
Lower Half (0-6)	68.0	50.0

"Upper Half/Lower Half" Percentages Grade 3, 1986 and Grade 6, 1989



Appendix C Figure 2

Grade 3 (1986) to Grade 6 (1989): Score Point Comparison



WHAT'S IN THIS PORTFOLIO?

No. _____

Name _____

_X_ 1.a. district-wide samples from given topics

___ 1986 3rd

___ 1987 4

___ 1988 5

___ 1989 6

___ 1990 7

___ 1991 8

___ 1992 9

___ 1993 10

___ Dec. 1993 11

___ 1.b. other pieces -- self- or teacher-selected for the portfolio
(LIST)

___ 2. pieces written for the portfolio
self-evaluation data

___ 3.a. writer interview data

b. teacher report data

___ 4. product summary sheet

progress summary sheet

general summary/synthesis/report of findings

___ 5. PREVIOUS ANALYSIS DATA

** Record your name on other side

PORTFOLIO PROFILE (rev. 1)

No. _____

Name _____

I. MAJOR shifts/changes/inconsistencies from grade-to-grade

IMPROVED _____

CONTINUING ERRORS _____

II. THE CONTENT/MESSAGE
engages topic
makes a point/focused
voice/style can be identified
takes risks

III. OVERALL IMPRESSION

___ this writer

___ comparison to others

IV. WHAT IS INFLUENCING?

QUESTIONS FOR WRITER.

Put reviewer name on other side.

Biography of a Writer

Sample Questions about the Writer's Background

Environments related to development of the writer

Where have you been? Where did you go to school?

Who taught you about writing? (What was taught?)

Is there any writing/reading at home? (Has someone read to you?)

Interests of the writer

What are you able to communicate about? (areas of expertise)

What subjects interest you?

Purposes for writing

When do you write?

What do you use writing for? (diary, letters, notes)

What kinds of writing have you done for school?

Attitudes about writing

What do people use writing for? (What does this writer think writing <u>does</u>? Is used for?)

Can you think of a time when writing really worked for you (succeeded)? Can you think of a time when writing did not work for you (a painful experience/memory)?

Writing Events

Can you tell me (from beginning to end) about one time (one experience or event) when you wrote something. Tell me everything.

Old Products

Do you have any old writing you can show me?

FORM FOR WRITER/PRODUCT INVESTIGATION

Comments about Product Features
(This may/should apply to one or more pieces.)

Features 1: CONTENT/ORGANIZATION

Features 2: USAGE/MECHANICS

Features 3: MODE/GENRE

Features 4: VOICE/STYLE

Include comments about the topics self-selected or teacher-made assignments.

Include comments about drafts (Is this a first draft?)

Comments about the Writer's Background

Include history: your class, previous years, at home

What does this writer think writing does? Is used for? (WHY)

Include a time when writing has and has not "worked".

Comments about the Writer's Writing Situations

Include comments about the environments/situations in which the student writes. (Tell the product's context.)

Does he write for himself?

Comments about the Writer's Control

Include comments on ownership in situations where he/she decides to write or where he/she must write

Include comments on risk-taking when he/she writes

What's typical for this writer? What can he/she do?

CONCLUSIONS about this student--his/her writing behaviors
-------> SUM UP

CONCLUSIONS about teaching this student